

Session 3 – Land: Policy, Availability & Strategy

Barbara Knecht – moderator, Chair of the Land Committee at the Urban Farming Institute

Harry Smith – Director of Sustainable Economic Development at Dudley St. Neighborhood Initiative

Luisa Oliviera – Senior Planner for Landscape Design at the City of Somerville

John (Tad) Read – Senior Planner at the Boston Redevelopment Authority

Kevin Essington – State Director of The Trust for Public Land in Massachusetts and Rhode Island

Barbara: The issue of land – the biggest challenge for many is land security and land tenure. Urban space includes not only growing on the ground but also rooftops and other spaces. The processes and strategies for acquiring urban land and space are complicated, sometimes extremely difficult, and mysterious if you've never done it before. I come from a housing background and there are amazing comparisons whether you're developing land for housing, open space, children's playgrounds, or for commercial. There are many things that the urban agriculture moment can borrow, adapt and steal from others doing land development.

How many of you are students? Farmers? Feel like you know the challenges of developing land in cities? Both the technical and social aspects? How many of you are public agencies? NGO's? Anything else? Academics? Cooperative? Lawyers?

I think about land in a couple of ways, the technical and social aspects, I also think about it in terms of tenure, preparation and management. You have to get hold of the land somehow, and then you've got to prepare it and then do continuing management, all of which includes a social component. One of the things that continues to be important is to continue being a good neighbor. The ways we do all these things also with the intent of being responsible neighbors.

One of the things that's driving a lot of the people here is that this is a bottom up movement more than a top down. There is an intent to have as much involvement from the people who are doing this, they want to bring their neighbors into a healthy environment, more than make a lot of money off land development. They're not going to make a lot of money off land development in this particular case.

We're going to talk today about the techniques about how to hold land but also about the regulatory environment, looking at what some cities have done, particularly Boston and Somerville.

We'll hear from Tad Read. He was responsible for the new zoning because it matters if you can do something legally or not. Somerville has had a legal use for farming or longer than that.

Harry Smith from DSNI will talk about methods of holding and making land available for these kinds of uses.

Tad: The theme of my remarks is this: "Article 89 is a wonderful ground breaking change for urban agriculture in Boston... BUT" – that's the theme. Article 89 transforms the zoning landscape for urban agriculture. Most agricultural uses go from being completely forbidden to being allowed or conditional. Much much easier to do. For example a ground level farm 1 acre in size goes from being forbidden to allowed at right. That's the easier kind of zoning you can have. Hydroponics up to 750 sq. ft. you can do in your backyard anywhere in the city now. A farm stand is something you can have on any urban farm in the city. Those are dramatic changes for farming in Boston. Feel free to refer to the sheet.

The landscape has changes dramatically, but the issue is that zoning is just one aspect of the permitting process – water, historic commission, special services department for structures. A whole number of permits you need. You're probably going to need help with that. Working with group at Harvard called Food Policy Clinic to build road map to spell out the steps you need to go through. This will dramatically demystify the process. That's the next important announcement the city will be making.

Luisa: I usually work on parks project. The mayor of Somerville saw Growing Power and said “WE NEED TO DO THIS IN SOMERVILLE.” We have a lot of people already doing things in Somerville. Developed a team and had a draft in 6 months came up with an ordinance. Somerville 4 square miles is the densest city in New England, we push a lot of innovation vertical, small space, temporary pop up gardens. Our zoning ordinance is organized by scale. Yard, garden, farm. Allows you to farm, keep chickens and keep bees. Put together user friendly ABCs of ag. Zoning is not comprehensible.

As well as a tumblr blog and facebook page.

Community building piece. Old time Somerville folks growing food because they come from agricultural places and young people movement who are into food. The first urban city farm which was a vacant lot. Let Groundworks Somerville do a barn raising. Hydroponic system. Mobile market. Sells subsidized food to low income families. Minimized conflicts with neighbors.

Kevin: Why is a nonprofit talking about owning farmland? That would not be a popular topic. A model for creating permanent ownership of farmland, conserving farmland. Something gets spent a lot of time on. How we can combine our knowledge working with farms in to other parts of the state with playgrounds and parks. Financial reasons. At the point we understand that in Boston ground level farms for profit. It's difficult to show that you can pay back capital costs through farming. Upkeep, living wage, keep it running, but UFI and city growers realized how to bridge the gap and alleviate the bottleneck of farmers seeking land. Partnership with UFI and DSNI.

Trust for Public Land estimates \$50,000.00 to build a farm in Boston. Water hookup, soil amendments. Some things donated, but at some point you need to lay out some capital. Acquiring city owned vacant lots. City intends to sell at deep discount. As we got started a year and a half ago we didn't know where to begin. There are lots of places to grow food almost too many, urban farming in Boston UEP field project TUFTS team identified vacant city lots into potential trying to advance. Could be replicated in other cities.

Harry: Started out campaign: Don't Dump On Us. How do we stop negative things from happening? Who owns the land? Who's starting the vision for how land is used – take a stand, own the land. Community land trust started. At the time there were 1200 vacant lots in the neighborhood. Created Dudley Urban Village vision. BRA granted eminent domain authority over vacant land in the neighborhood. In order to do this work you have to have the control of the land and it has to be part of a vision. Not just try to get the neighbors to agree to this farm or that farm. You can understand that it's all part of a larger vision. When we started working with the Food Project, increase organizing and local access to food. Urban farm on West Cottage to come into the land trust. A year ago partnership with UFI & Trust for Public Land came in, and land trust could hold land as a long term steward. Possibility of the community land trust model for economic development and permanent housing. Excited about pilot on 3 lots larger urban farming movement. Met Greg Watson in 1994.

Taking each entity's expertise is what we're trying to do. Tad once said “zoning is a way of unlocking the land.” regulations is the pro side, what these cities have done to promote this activity. You can't get money if you're going to be doing something illegal. It's happening in a lot of cities.

Luisa – Most of the land, if there is land people want to develop and make a lot of money. Envision a network of local food, can be a small lot sized farm, or people in their own backyards, so you can sell your produce. Shopping In a hyperlocal way. A network of food sources. Momentum around farm in different ways, temporary, yard sharing, because Somerville is so dense. No one is going to buy a couple of million dollar houses and knock them down and build a farm.

Iterative process, UFI started with sites that were suggested by people in neighborhoods. Starting small, as other people suggest sites. Does this make sense? Small farms are hard to farm. The sharing part is part of what makes them viable, starting to think of clusters and hubs? When is a farm too big for a neighborhood?

Harry: UFI you guys are bringing farms that have a lot of community support. We don't want to be seen as going into other neighborhoods and saying "Guess what -- we're here!" We'll support urban farming but we want to know that each site has community buy in.

Long term vs short term – sometimes there is inherent conflict in a neighborhood.

Kevin: Pent up demand from new farmers to get onto any land anywhere. Brian Donahue been looking into how much land it takes – every acre only half! Food security and green jobs – living wage, scale, can't say we're going to feed a lot of people yet.

Isabel Rand city councilor in Beverly – convince private landowners of underutilized lots.

Kevin: Public vs. city owned or vacant MBTA owned cost of entry is much lower given today's public investment in farmland, we hope to see a new investment in the state.

Luisa: Hesitance around farm because of soil contamination and chickens. Liability issue – overcome. Chicken, a lot of people fear them. You can have a chicken coop and it's not nasty. Rodents – do gardens attract rats? People have an idea that composters, chickens attract rodents. Wonder if other people have had these perceptions and fears?

In CA they've passed an urban ag incentive zone act. Owner can make a contact with local jurisdiction to be taxed at ag rates instead of rates. Tax incentive. Also Lawrence. Having the ability to do that in a place like Beverly makes it attractive.

Tad – fear of rodents and chickens- it doesn't transform the landscape for hens and bees. Public perception issue. Fear of rodents, god knows what. Also with composting. If not properly done. Those are issues, some are legitimate.

Barbara – technical social integration, letting neighbors know.

Questions:

Leah, student at Tufts – Goal or ideal outcome of urban ag – food security self sufficiency and sustainability. Impact to affect food security possible in Boston?

Tad – Thoughts about that – food experts can chime in to correct me about this. Produce you can grow

hydroponically is 10-20x larger than in ground. Look up Lufa Farm Montreal. One area where scaling can happen. Price point between Shaws and Whole Foods. Hydroponics to scale things up. Ground level farming has other benefits community neighborhood building economic development.

Kevin: Economic development issue. Only so much we can do. Take unused asset of city lots to create income for people.

Barb: Farming occurs on lots that have been vacant for a long time.

Luisa: Studies showing that it doesn't make a dent. Agrobusiness stuff isn't sustainable. Population moving to cities. We are generations from ag in our own lives.

Food security conversation about nutrient quality, increase fruit veg consumption.

Boston compost – clean soils needed to build agricultural infrastructure, money from foundations private investment, was to leverage public land and resources to produce soil lower cost. Accessing state land that is not utilized at all.

Best use of the land like Cuba, Hurricane Sandy to stop the trucks Boston base eco region 2.5 million people in this land .001% dedicated to ag within the 95 corridor. What's it going to take to change the mindset of people?

Garden plots in Europe.

Speak to the issue of growing hydroponically vs. in soil? Off topic both/and.

Restoring Roots cooperative based in JP – bringing conservation land and ag together not in competition. Not be divisive.

Key: It's challenging. Public lands think national forest, parks, etc. Working lands tend to be set aside – explicit conflicts with almost every other kind of use. Freedom as a farmer to do what you need to do while people are out there.

CLF water restoration projects complimented with urban ag

Foraging – Baltimore, Seattle, Philadelphia, NY, very disappointingly averse to foraging. We should be encouraging it, and also edible landscaping.

Tax structure treats different land differently.

Zoning was historically to separate land uses, now trying to integrate them back together

Lincoln has conservation land that is farm land.

Luisa: In the city, it's like RATS!!!

Jenny Rushlon CLF – Food Safety Modernization Act – Currently drafted would be impossible to have people.

Wetlands Wildlands publications new publication New England Food Vision Brian Donahue – cities on 495 belt.

Johanna from Equity Trust- looking in suburban areas, how much of this partnership will be replicable in other areas?

Harry: Land trust model been used – trick is getting groups to do it all together, the model is there.